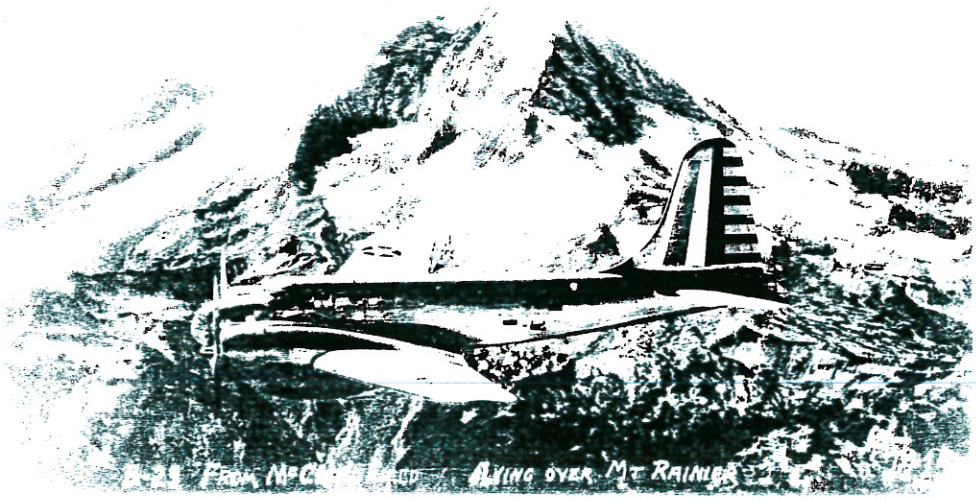
THE REAL STORY OF THE LOON LAKE BOMBER

By

Richard H. Holm Jr.



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The Real Story Of The Loon Lake Bomber

History is similar to some aspects of nature because it is constantly changing. Some parts of history are lost and new history is created. Over time, stories become skewed, facts turned and twisted like trees in the wind. The facts and stories about the B-23 Dragon that crashed at Loon Lake, 40 miles north of McCall, in January of 1943 have changed over time. Through research it is possible to look into the muddy water and pick out parts that are crystal clear, and after looking long enough, the real truths and facts can be seen.

The history of the crew and plane starts in Tonopah, Nevada, sometime in the early part of January of 1943. Max Black, a friend of Ed Freeborg, survivor of the crash, said that he had asked Freeborg why they were in Tonopah. Freeborg told Black that the Army Air Force (AAF) thought the B-23 would make a good torpedo bomber, so they wanted the 34th bomber squadron to fly the B-23s down to Nevada for experimenting with this new idea in the desert (Black, Interview). The 34th bomb squadron flew B-23s out of McChord Airfield in Tacoma, Washington, where they were used mainly for submarine patrol along the west coast (G. Freeborg).

The B-23 was designed in 1939 by McDonald Douglas and was the first Army aircraft to have a rear tail gunner position. Only thirty-eight B-23s were made. In 1942 Jimmy Doolittle wanted to use the B-23 on the infamous Doolittle raid over Japan but the wingspan was too wide for the aircraft carrier. By 1943 such planes as the B-25 and B-26 had outdated the B-23 in range, payload, and armament. So the AAF used them for training and sub patrol (World Airways). The AAF wanted to put the B-23 into a more useful area, so they wanted to test it out as a torpedo bomber. The 34th went to Tonopah,

did their testing, and it failed. So on January 29, 1943, the squadron flew back to McChord. B-23 number 39052 was transporting two extra people back to McChord, so the plane was a little uncomfortable since it was only made for a crew of six (G. Freeborg). (Note that the tail number appears as 29052 in some sources but in others it appears as 39052. According to Dennis Bergstrom, vintage airplane expert, pre 1940 aircraft used tail numbers beginning with the year they were manufactured. Which means that the B-23 at Loon Lake is 39052. It is unclear why some AAF documents refer to the tail number as 29052. Some other documents also refer to the tail number as 9052.)

A B-23 with the glassed nose and tail section this would appear to be identical to the B-23 at Loon Lake minus the paint scheme. The Loon Lake B-23 was O.D. green with yellow tail numbers. (Photo courtesy of Army Air Force).

Edward Freeborg, radio operator on aircraft 39052, wrote "Crash in the Hills" shortly after the incident of January 29, 1943. Being the radio operator, Freeborg recalled no unusual happening until after they checked in at the midway point, Humbolt radio. After the check in, they hit a massive snowstorm and were unable to land at McChord Airfield, so they were re-routed to the airfield in Burns, Oregon. By this time the weather had only gotten worse and they flew above the town for over twenty minutes but were unable to find the airfield. They momentarily picked up the Boise beam, then decided that they should head northeast with the idea that the weather would be better and they would be able to land at Gowen Field in Boise, Idaho. But loss of radio contact and severe icing of the cockpit windows and wings only exacerbated the situation. By this time fuel was running low and the crew came to realize they were not going to make it to Gowen Field. Then someone on the plane spotted a clearing, thinking it was a field, but in actuality it was frozen, snow-covered Loon Lake. With too much air speed and frozen flaps they missed the first approach and circled back. On the second approach they were still going too fast, overshot the lake and went into the trees, shearing off both wings and crushing the bombardiers compartment (Freeborg 1).

According to Lt. James V. Kelly's accident report, Lt. Robert Orr ordered the crew to put on parachutes and be ready to abandon ship. As they were losing altitude for the jump, they spotted the clearing, circled the lake once and when coming around for the second approach, the right engine caught on fire and they crash landed (1). Cpl. Earl Beaudry's accident report states, ". . . the right engine had been on fire before the crash, switches were turned off, ship crashed" (1). Lt. Orr's accident report mentions nothing of a fire, but he says the cause of the accident was, "Due to the fact no means of navigation

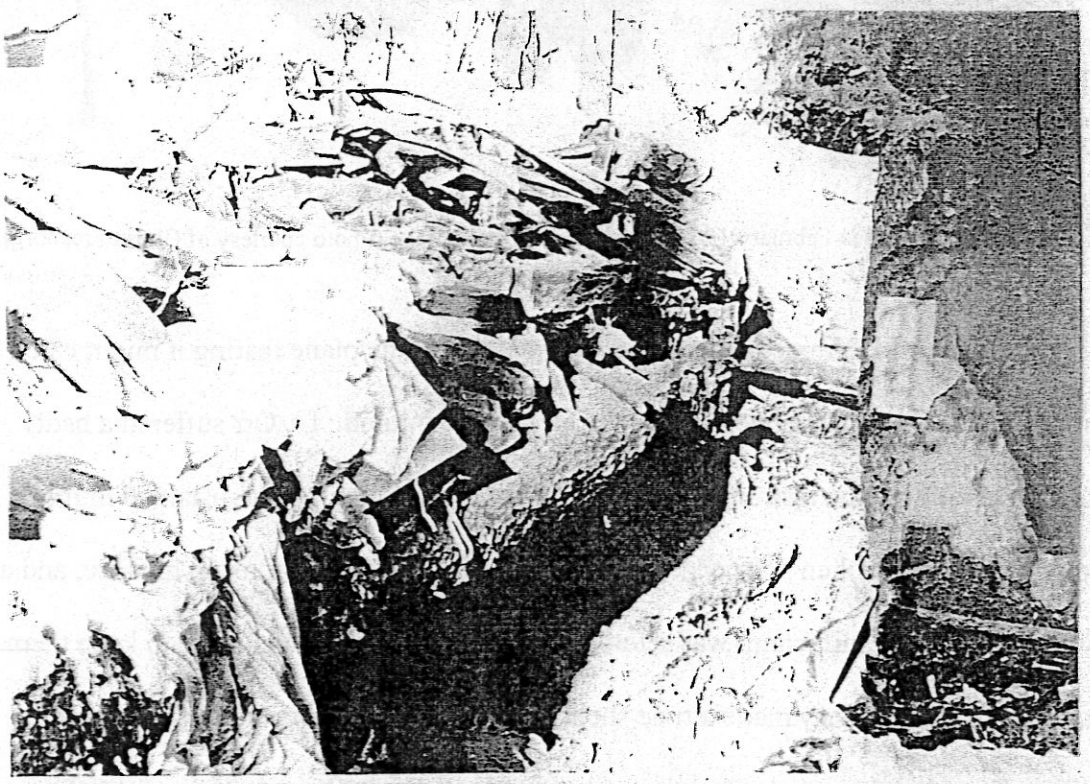
with radio receiver gone, and icing conditions bad enough to make it impossible for us to continue flying" (2).

There are several perspectives on what actually took place the afternoon of January 29, 1943. Combining information taken from the accident reports it is likely that Lt. Orr had the motors leaned out, to save on gas since the fuel supply was low. The pilot decided they could no longer fly because of severe icing, low fuel and no means of navigation. They spotted a clearing, so they went down. It was decided that it would be better to stay together and stay aboard the ship rather than parachute out and be spread out over the rough territory. When the plane came in on the first approach and missed because of too much speed, Lt. Orr probably pulled the throttles back, which caused backfiring. The engine could have been experiencing carburetor icing, which is caused by cold temperatures. This is a condition when ice forms on the carburetor jets causing the fuel to drip rather than being atomized and ingested into the motor. So with the combination of dripping fuel and a flame created when the engine backfired, the motor caught on fire. Lt. Orr shut all switches off, still overshot the lake and bellied into the trees. In all accounts of the incident it would appear that the intention was to land on the lake with the wheels up, but because the flaps were frozen they could not slow down enough and they went into the trees.

The B-23 as it rested in February 1943 on the shore of Loon Lake (Photo courtesy of Gloria Freeborg).

Freeborg said, "Immediately we all jumped out of the plane fearing it might catch on fire" (2). Only two passengers out of the eight were injured. Lt. Orr suffered a badly cut hand from hitting the instrument panel on impact, and Sgt. Hoover sustained multiple injures, including a broken knee cap, broken wrist, cut hand, lacerations on his face, and a broken foot. A makeshift camp was set up with parts of the plane and a fire to keep them warm (Freeborg 2). "They made a rude shelter, dug out of the snow and covered with wreckage from the plane, to protect them from the elements" (Cascade News Feb 19). Lloyd Johnson, a rescuer that worked for the Forest Service, remembered the camp that they had set up, very well. The camp was mainly centered around the fire with pieces of the plane scattered from one end to the other. The shelter was a dugout against the plane and at the mouth of the dugout was the fire. The crew had found a life raft on the plane

and put it near the fire. The life raft was the most comfortable item they could find for the badly injured Sgt. Hoover. Lloyd Johnson said that Sgt. Hoover was lying in the raft, his leg was elevated and completely black with blisters on top of blisters. Sgt. Hoover had lost all feeling of his leg and was completely non-responsive at this point (Interview). On Monday, February 1, Freeborg worked for hours trying to get the radio to work; he got one message out, "crew intact, need food, clothing and an axe. At the south end of a lake near Boise, Idaho." This would be all the military had to go by, and Freeborg was not even sure if anyone had received it (Freeborg 2-3).



This is where the crew lived. Note the piece of aluminum against the tree to act as a heat shield, so it kept where they were sleeping warm (Photo courtesy of Jayne Brown).

A confidential report written by the AAF entitled "Transmittal of Report of the Search" includes exactly what was done during the rescue. According to this report signed by Lyman L. Phillips, Commanding Air Corps Colonel, the next day the AAF set

up several search and rescue bases at Burns, Oregon and Pendleton, Oregon. Gowen Field was not a major base at this point in the rescue because the plane was thought to be closer to the Burns area since the last radio message was received at an altitude of 70 feet and southeast of Burns. The message said, "no oxygen, receiver out, preparing to abandon ship." The first major breakthrough was on February 1, at 2300 hours. Victoria, B.C. picked up some morse code, which said, "B-23, 29-052, all crew intact, 5000 feet, south end of lake, need food, clothing, axe." The message that is recorded in the AAF report is different than the one which Freeborg himself wrote in "Crash in the Hills." It is very possible that he just shortened it for his paper. Both messages are very similar, the major difference being that Freeborg said they were near Boise (2). With the location of Boise mentioned, this would have helped the AAF tremendously since the air search was focused in areas over eastern Oregon.

For the first five days, twenty-four airplanes were sent out in the search. The last six days saw a major increase, with seventy-three planes in constant operation during daylight hours. Over 400 photos were taken during the search and examined by Major Walsh of the Photo Intelligence. On the morning of the eleventh day, February 10, Colonial Phillips, Lt. Col. Darrow, and Major J. F. Starkey of the IV Air Force discontinued the search for the lost B-23 bomber number 9052 (Report of Search). It is very interesting to note that the men from the B-23 actually did see three planes. In an interview with a reporter from the Idaho Statesman at the Gowen Field Hospital, Lt. Robert Orr said, "we shot off several of our flares, but the ship didn't see us. This light plane went directly overhead, then 45 minutes later flew back. On the fourth or fifth

night, the crew saw two Army planes pass over, and again vainly shot up flares" (Idaho Morning Statesman Feb16).

On Tuesday evening, February 2, it was decided by the crew that a few men should walk out. Three of the most fit men were chosen, Lt. Schermerhorn, Sgt. Pruitt, and Sgt. Freeborg. The three left at nine o'clock on Wednesday morning, February 3 (Freeborg 3). The five remaining at the plane were Lt Orr, Lt. Kelly, Sgt Hoover, Sgt Loewen, and Cpl. Beaudry. Eleven days after the three others had left to walk out, the five remaining fliers spotted a Travelair flying overhead. The plane was piloted by Penn Stohr, a famous backcountry pilot, who was on a routine mail flight to Warren, Idaho.

According to Dan Stohr, Penn Stohr's son, his dad had been taking different routes on his various flights to places in the backcountry for about two weeks, hoping to find the missing bomber. Dan also remembered that his dad was always a little disappointed in himself that he had not found the downed bomber earlier (Interview).

He did not land right then, as many people believe, but flew back to Cascade and reported to Gowen Field that he had found the missing B-23. The AAF did not want him involved in rescuing the fliers and asked him if he "was qualified to fly over this territory" (Cascade News Feb19). That day, Saturday, February 13, Gowen Field sent out several groups of planes; as many as eight planes went right over the crash and did not even see it. Then with Stohr's help, an Army plane was able to drop off the supplies that were needed, mainly food, by parachute. The parachute was supposed to land on the lake but overshot and went into the woods (Cascade News Feb19). Lt Orr said, "the food dropped Saturday night was eaten by the crew members before they took the bundles back to camp . . .we were too weak to do much with the bundles. We were still trying to

drag them back to the plane when Stohr flew in the next day" (Idaho Morning Statesman, Feb 16). Stohr made two flights into Loon Lake on Sunday, landing both times on the lake. On these two flights, "Stohr carried Gene Powers of McCall, assistant forest supervisor and Lloyd Johnson of McCall, another woodsman, to the scene" (Cascade News Feb 19). Lloyd recalled fixing the flyers some food; they were really hungry but did not eat much because they had gone without eating much for so long. Lloyd remembers the conversation with the fliers was very minimal and said, "they were all too rum dumb to really talk." All five fliers were so happy to be rescued, but at the same time completely tired and ready to get out (Interview). The men were flown to Cascade and then put in an ambulance and taken to Gowen Field Hospital for medical treatment.

After the five were rescued by Stohr, the search began for the other three, Sgt Freeborg, Lt. Schermerhorn and Sgt. Pruitt, who had previously walked out for help. Lloyd Johnson and Gene Powers had followed the three missing fliers tracks down to the Secesh River. They then radioed to Fred Williams, who was the Lake Fork District Ranger operating the radio in McCall, to have him notify Penn Stohr to fly in some others with gear and snowshoes (Johnson, Interview).

Meantime Lloyd and Gene walked back to the crash site and waited for the others. Ted Harwood, Warren Brown and Glenn Thompson were flown in with all the supplies. The search party left Loon Lake and followed the flier's tracks down the Secesh River to Slick Rock Brown's Cabin where they found evidence that the three fliers had been there a few days before. It was about this time that the three fliers had made contact to McCall. So the search party walked out to Krassel and was picked up by a plane flown by Dick Johnson (Powers, Personal Narrative).

It turns out that the three fliers had left the plane and hiked to the top of a ridge to see what type of territory they had to walk through, and the best route. Freeborg wrote in his paper, "Believe me, that was the most disappointing sight I had ever hoped to see. Hills, hills and more hills in every direction. Believe me, I firmly believed that we looked in the face of death" (3). Lt. Schermerhorn was interviewed at the hospital after they had been rescued and shared his story. "The first day we walked for 20 hours . . . It seemed like we traveled miles and miles, but the map in the ranger cabin here shows we couldn't have made more than 2 miles, after that we walked only eight hours a day." (Idaho Evening Statesman Feb 17). "The third day we came to a stream and since there is a old saying that to find civilization always walk down stream, so we did just that. I think it was eight days later we found the cabin" (Idaho Evening Statesman Feb 17).

At this abandoned cabin, known as Slick Rock Browns, they found food and a map of the Payette National Forest area that they were in. They stayed there for three days, rested, and ate pancakes. They headed over Lick Creek Summit and down the other side, where they found the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp near Black Lee Creek. They broke in and found some food and built a fire. Sgt. Pruitt's feet were so badly frozen that he could no longer walk. Schermerhorn original was going to stay with Pruitt because the whole hike out he had been walking in shoes too small for him, but he and Freeborg traded. So after a few days rest, they prepared to leave. They knew they were close to civilization so they went on and left Pruitt at the CCC camp with an ample amount of food. The next day, Tuesday, February 16, they followed the telephone lines along the road and found the Lake Fork Ranger Station. They managed to find some food and a telephone. Lt. Schermerhorn picked up the receiver and to his surprise heard a

hum, he waited for a while and finally the operator picked up with hesitation (Freeborg 4-8). The operator was Leona Hoff Park; she thought that there must be a short in the switchboard when she saw the light come on, for it had not come on since last fall, but her curiosity got the best of her and she picked up. The operator and Lt. Schermerhorn were both amazed. Leona called her husband Don, who worked for the Forest Service, and he put together a search party that consisted of Yale Mitchell, Leonard Lietske, John Wick, Bill Garrett, and Gil McCoy (Freeborg, Scrapbook). The rest of that afternoon and early evening the phone rang off the hook and eventually the two fliers refused to answer it and fell asleep (Freeborg 8). Freeborg sums up his and Schermerhorns stay at the Lake Fork Guard Station very well:

> About 7 o'clock the first Rangers came and stayed for about an hour before going on up after Pruitt. Then some more came up at about 11 with a big toboggan for Pruitt and we sent them on up to the C.C.C. Camp, and went to sleep. About three the last two Rangers came in but we paid no attention to them and slept merrily on. The next morning they cooked us the biggest breakfast I have ever had. At least 4 or 5 eggs, bacon, half dozen slices of toast, not to mention coffee, and hot cakes. Oh me oh my we did eat. I can't say enough for these Rangers. They are absolutely tops. Every one of them (Freeborg 8).

The three men had hiked an amazing forty miles in snow up to their waists at times, with only their flight gear as protection from the cold and freezing snow (Freeborg 4-9).

Rescuers at the Lake Fork Guard Station, from left to right, Yale Mitchell, Leonard Lietske, Don Park, John Wick, Bill Garrett, Gil McCoy and Sgt. Pruitt on the sled (Photo from Freeborg Scrapbook).

At about two or three o'clock on Wednesday afternoon, February 17, the three fliers were brought into McCall on a tractor-drawn sled. The schools and business around the area had closed so that people could greet the fliers (Freeborg 8). During the war years, the town of McCall and its surrounding area were very rural and did not have much contact with other communities during the winter months. Traveling was not only difficult but very time consuming and costly. The Payette Lakes Star, the local paper, focused on national news, for very few local people received another newspaper. Local historian, Dan LeVan II, remembers McCall with a population of about 950 people that were mainly lumberjacks, mill workers, Forest Service employees and outdoors people in general. With this type of employment, it created a tight knit group of individuals that banded together (Interview). With a nation at war, patriotism and pride were already at an all-time high, but take into account a whole community that was already very closely

associated with each other, the feeling of American pride was overwhelming. When the news came to town that they had located the plane, it was as if the war had come to the home front and everyone was more than willing to do what ever they could to help. LeVan II remembered, "a feeling that was not really describable when the young men came through town on the sled" (Interview).

Young boys and men already dreaming of the glamour of war and the aircraft that were being flown for the war effort, must have been in suspense that one had crashed in their backyard. Only a few locals, such as the rescuers, actually saw the plane. Those who could not were left to their own imagination, and this is where many of the misconceptions and wrong information originated. For example some of these misconceptions were recorded on June 25, 1999 when Larry Kingsbury, the Payette National Forest historian interviewed Dan LeVan II. LeVan II is a person that has immense knowledge of McCall and is often involved with the history of the Forest Service. LeVan II stated, "There were several packaged bombsights being transported on the B-23. The airmen used a .50 cal machine gun to fall lodgepole pine trees for firewood." Some people say that there was a Norden Bombsight on board the aircraft. The Norden Bombsight was one of the biggest military secrets of the time; it was an advanced bombsight that was very accurate and superior to the enemies. Some also argue if there were machine guns or not.

These misconceptions are still debated among the locals of the area. The stories had died out over the years, but were revived in the early eighties when local newspapers began writing of the event. One example is the 1983 article written by Mary Jenkins that appeared in the February 28 issue of the Star News. The title of the article was "Idahoans

Debate What Type of Plane Crashed in '43." She interviewed Ralph Colburn and based the article on the information he gave. One story that Colburn shared "was that after the rescue, the engines and machine guns were removed from the plane and left on the iced-over lake to sink to the bottom when the ice melted." This is a complete myth; the motors are still there, connected to what is left of the fuselage. Secondly, how would someone carry a several thousand pound motor out to the lake?

If one is to examine the plane, there are all types of instructions in various places throughout the plane for mounting and removing camera equipment. Most military aircraft equipped with cameras were used for reconnaissance and did not carry armament. Some type of fighter plane protected them. Merely based on observation of original military photographs of the B-23, they would appear to have been equipped both ways from the factory, with or with out machine guns. However, the ones without machine guns could be pre-production B-23s. If they had machine guns, the bombardier's compartment was glass so it could mount the .30 cal machine gun, and another .30 cal machine gun was mounted in the center of the fuselage. The tail was glass as well, which sported a .50 cal machine gun on a clamshell door mount. The B-23 at Loon Lake did have glassed in nose and tail gunner section. In "Crash in the Hills" Freeborg lists the guns and ammunition that were on the plane, ". . . one .45 cal. pistol, and two large 12 gauge shotguns, with size 7.5 shot for skeet shooting, a couple of .30 cal. machine guns and one or two .50 cal. flexible guns with all kinds of ammunition for everything except the .45" (2). Dan Stohr remembers his father discussing the machine guns that were on board the B-23 (Interview). Lloyd Johnson also confirmed that there were machine guns at the crash site. He claims that the airmen never used machine guns to fall trees. They

had absolutely no reason to; when he was at the crash site, they had found an old ax, in a cabin across the lake, that they were using to split firewood. Before they had found the ax, they were using the trees that the plane had sheared off when it crashed (Johnson, Interview). It is really hard to say what exactly happened because there are no accounts that were recorded by any of the crew members. It is easy to say that most sources concur that machine guns were present.

According to Gloria Freeborg, a Norden Bombsight was never confirmed to be on board by any of the crew; however, Kelly's hometown paper did print that there was a Norden Bombsight on board; the AAF was non-committal about it. Lois McMahan has done some research on the crash and had the opportunity to talk to three of the eight survivors of the crash during the 1980s. In a letter from Lois McMahan to Ed Freeborg, dated August 27, 1991, she makes reference to interviews she had with Schermerhorn and Loewen. "Loewen felt there was no Norden Bombsight aboard. Schermerhorn didn't know." Terry Aitken, the Chief Curator at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, said that B-23s did not have a sophisticated enough autopilot system to run the Norden. He also said that the Norden was not installed in aircraft until late 1942 and the B-23 was built in 1939 (Interview). However, Myrl Morris, Chief of Restorations at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, says that a handful of B-23s were converted to bombardier training planes and could have utilized the Norden Bombsight, but he concluded that it would be a long shot that the B-23 at Loon Lake would have had one (Interview). Evidence would disagree with LeVan II's statement that a Norden Bombsight was on board the aircraft. It is most likely that it had a bombsight, but an early version, not as advanced as the Norden.

On Wednesday, March 3, 1943, Glenn Thompson, John Wick, Tom Coski and Walter Howard of McCall were flown into Jack Fernan's place at Secesh Meadows, along with Melvin Brock, warrant officer of Gowen Field. The five were flown in by Penn Stohr to retrieve the most valuable and important parts of the plane for the AAF. From Fernan's place, they hiked the nine miles to the plane on snowshoes (Payette Lakes Star Mar 4). The article does not mention any specific parts that were removed from the aircraft but one assumes it would be items like guns, ammunition, and anything that was a military secret. The article does give details on the trip out with all the parts. "All was carried on pack boards for four miles and then pulled on toboggan the remaining five miles to the ranch. The nature of the country was such that the toboggan could not be used part of the trip because of its tendency to slide off into the creek" (Payette Lakes Star Mar 4). Stohr was capable of carrying 1200 pounds in his Travelair with various parts from the wrecked bomber, which took two trips to take out with the salvaging crew (Cascade News Mar 5). According to Jim Larkin who worked for Johnson Flying Service from 1949 to 1957, Jack Fernan's place would have been chosen because it is the closest landing place to Loon Lake. It is a great place to land and take off from with a ski equipped Travelair (Larkin, Interview).

Many things have happened to the people that were involved in the crash over the years. Some have become ill, others have passed away, and many cannot be located. Some of the survivor's wives such as Billie (Orr) Larson and Gloria Freeborg have been of great assistance in clearing up many of the myths and misconceptions behind the crash. Ed Freeborg passed away three years after visiting the crash site in 1992. It was the first time he had been back to see the plane since it crashed in 1943. He was the only

survivor to ever go back to the wreckage. Lt. Schermerhorn had planned to revisit the crash, but he had contacted Ed in 1994 and had such bad arthritis that he could not even walk to his mailbox from his house. Lt. Robert Orr was killed in the Pacific in late 1943. It is unknown what happened to the other five survivors. The crash and the events that followed were an absolutely amazing feat and took an unimaginable amount of courage and personal strength to survive. The real story is legend enough without being twisted and turned to embellish the truth.

The Post War Years

The B-23 at Loon Lake served as a hidden treasure deep in the Payette National Forest unscathed for years. Many people would go looking for it and never find it. It took an experienced outdoors men to get to Loon Lake in the fifties and sixties, the trails were difficult and very long. One of the areas greatest scavengers Buckskin Bill, long time resident of Five Mile Bar visited the plane a few years after it crashed and took the plexiglass off of it to make a bay window in his house (Peterson, 18).

Les Sherrill, an avid hunter and fisherman, remembers making several trips to the bomber during those years. It not only served as a destination for his friends and family on various camping trips, but also as a shelter from some nasty mountain storms. One particular time he remembers going to the B-23 and removing a propeller blade and trying to carry it out. He and his friends got it across Loon Creek and out to the trailhead where they strapped it to Les's Tote-goat motorcycle. They thought they had it made and could not wait to see their treasure mounted above the fireplace. It was too soon to be thinking good thoughts, because just when Les began to climb the steep part of the trail off of Loon Creek, the Tote-goat and propeller blade toppled backwards. Les scrambled out of the way and the bike tumbled to the bottom. After several attempts, the group gave up and stashed the propeller blade a ways off the trail. Each year they came back, the propeller blade was a little bit farther down the path (Sherrill, Interview).

The crashed B-23 has provided similar stories for dozen of hunters and fisherman as it rests near the shore of Loon Lake. The B-23's slumber was broken in May of 1981 when the Payette National Forest received several phone calls from the Confederate Air Force about salvaging parts from it. At this point, no one really knew what type of

aircraft it was. All they knew was that it was a World War II bomber. Many speculated it was a B-18 or a B-25, and others confused the crash with another crash that happened that same year near Challis, Idaho, which was a B-17. It was later established that the plane was a B-23 Dragon. Letters began to come in more frequently since the bomber was identified as a B-23. In 1985, Travis Air Force Base became very interested in removal of some specific parts. In 1986, McChord Air Force Base wanted to remove parts from the wreckage as well, but they were mainly looking for parts that had already been removed. One person from McChord even suggested that the Forest Service ask people to return parts they had removed. Several other inquiries were made, even some by individuals. In 1991, a helicopter pilot that was doing work on forest fires in the area offered to buy the plane from the Forest Service for one dollar, and he would pay for the removal of it. He claimed that the plane was polluting the surrounding water and if removed, it would allow for vegetation to grow back (USDA-FS File, PY-843).

The Forest Service refused all offers until October of 1998, when Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio contacted Lawrence A. Kingsbury, requesting removal of certain parts. Kingsbury could not deny the Air Force the right to take parts off an airplane that was owned by the United States government and after all, the plane did not meet National Register of Historic Places criteria for eligibility in 1992. However, this B-23 crash site is a historic property and a public recreational destination. Kingsbury believes that the public likes the crash site the way that it is. There are very few places where the public can climb all over a WW II bomber. The Payette National Forest has installed three interpretive signs in the area of the crash site, which explains a

little bit about who was involved and the history behind the crash. (Kingsbury, Interview).

General Metcalf and crew looking the B-23 over for salvageable parts in the fall of 1998 (Photo courtesy of Lawrence A. Kingsbury).

In the fall of 1998 General Metcalf and Terry Aitken, from Wright-Patterson AFB, flew to Boise and met with the Idaho Air National Guard. The National Guard flew to McCall in a Black Hawk helicopter and picked up Larry Kingsbury and Randy Swick, McCall District Ranger. From here, they flew to Loon Lake and landed east of

the crash site. The parts they needed were there (USDA-FS File, PY-843). Wright-Pat AFB was able to cut out what they needed the following year and plans to use most of the parts off the Loon Lake B-23 as templates. Wright-Pat is restoring a B-23 to exact military specification and it will be the record copy for the United States Air Force collection. After the war was over, most B-23s were bought by Howard Hughes and turned into passenger planes. When they were converted, many of the military parts were removed and this was the case with the B-23 at Wright-Pat AFB. The B-23 at Loon Lake provided the missing military parts that are needed to complete the restoration at Wright-Pat AFB (Aitken, Interview).

Since the United States Air Force has been to the crash site, the bomber has experienced a few more events that mark its age. The eight fliers that were on the plane were from the 34th Bomb Squadron. On September 20, 1999, airmen from the 34th Bomb Squadron, stationed at Mountain Home Air Force Base in Mountain Home, Idaho, visited the crash site and dedicated a plaque in memory of the squadron (Star News Sept 23). The plaque is located on the starboard side of the aircraft. The winter of 2001-2002 took its toll on the main part of the fuselage. After the rear part of the floor and the back part of the fuselage were removed by the Air Force, there was not much to support it and the winters snow caved it in.

The People

The people that were involved in the crash itself, and the people that were part of the search and rescue are what make the story of 39052 fascinating.

Edward M. Freeborg

Ed Freeborg was born in Spokane, Washington on April 9, 1923 to Marvin and Dalha Freeborg. A few years later they had another son Don, who later joined the Merchant Marines. The Freeborgs moved around quite a bit, living in Everett, Washington for a while, then moving back to Spokane, then to Lewiston, Idaho where Ed's father opened up a dental lab, which he later lost in the depression. After loosing the dental lab, the Freeborgs moved to Wallace, Idaho and eventually to Seattle, Washingtion (G. Freeborg, Interview).

Ed graduated from high school in Wallace and enlisted in the Army Air Force. He attended radio school in Scottsfield, Illinois. Ed was then stationed at McChord and did some submarine patrols out of Astoria, Oregon, at that time as well. At this point in his Army Air Force career he thought he would be shipped out to the Pacific, but then he was on the plane that crashed at Loon Lake (G. Freeborg, Interview).

After the crash, Ed's parents came to Boise to pick him up at the Gowen Field Hospital. Lt. Orr and his wife Billie greeted his parents at the bus depot, filling them in on the latest news about Ed. Mrs. Freeborg wrote in Ed's scrapbook that it was the happiest night in her and her husband's lives. They spent the night at the Owyhee Hotel, which cost them $6.88. Ed returned to Seattle. He had some time off, which he spent at home, resting. While he was home, he and his mother put together a complete scrapbook

of the event and he wrote "Crash In the Hills," his personal narrative of the event (Freeborg, Scrapbook).

Ed Freeborg at the Gowen Field Hospital, showing his parents how far they had been on an Idaho National Forest Service map (Photo from Freeborg Scrapbook).

Ed was then assigned to Hammer Field in Fresno, California, along with Sgt. Loewen and Cpl. Beaudry (Freeborg Scrapbook). Ed was then transferred back to McChord Field on June 15, 1943 (Freeborg 9). He signed up for the Army Special Training Program where he studied engineering until the program was discontinued. He was eventually shipped out and went on a troop ship to India where he was a radio

operator on planes that flew to China over the Himalayas; this flight is often referred to as the Hump (G. Freeborg, Letter To Richard Holm).

He was discharged from the AAF at the war's end and then attended the University of Washington and became an architect, for designing kitchens. While he was at the University, he met his wife to be, Gloria. They were wed in May of 1951 and eventually had three kids. Ed worked for many years at Northwest Hotel Supply in Yakima, Seattle, and Portland; after he retired, he started his own business in Portland (G. Freeborg, Interview).

In the sixties, Gloria's parents often visited McCall during the summer and would ask the locals about the airplane crash. Ed and Gloria always meant to go back, but were too busy with raising kids and working. In 1991, they made the trip to McCall with the intention of visiting the crash site, but due to Ed's health the hike in would have been too much, so they chartered a plane and flew over the crash site. Ed returned to McCall in August of 1992 with John Wilcox, a neighbor form Portland. With the help of Max Black, he was able to visit the crash site on horseback. Max rode in on motorcycle and Max Black's friend, Joe Coburn provided the horses. Max documented Ed revisiting the crash by video taping the event (G. Freeborg Interview).

When Ed returned to Portland he wrote a brief paper entitled a "Survivor Returns to Bomber at Loon Lake," about his return trip and all the memories that were renewed.

> Once I got there, I had an eerie feeling, of deja-vu-it was quite a surprise to see the results of almost 50 years of vandalism-Engines stripped, propellers gone, all the instruments gone-hundreds of bullet holes shot into and out of the main body-

Almost all of the carry able items are gone-although there are still some panel-parts-wire hose etc. I suppose the parts should last a few more years for souvenirs. Nostalgia makes for conjectures-, and I suppose the most memorable feeling to me was the difference in the Seasons and how pleasant and beautiful it is in the summer (Freeborg 2).

Ed Freeborg passed away on September 1, 1995, at the age of seventy-two, while playing golf with his wife (G. Freeborg, Interview).

Ed Freeborg with John Wilcox standing on the wreckage of the plane in August of 1992 (Photo courtesy of Gloria Freeborg).

After the crash, the pilot Lt. Robert Orr went back to Tacoma, Washington to spend time with his wife Billie. They had met at a U.S.O club while he was stationed at McChord and she was attending The College of Puget Sound (Larson, Interview). They were married shortly after they met, on July 16,1942, in Fresno, California. Billie was 20 and Lt. Orr was 23. He spent some time in Alaska and California before he was shipped out to the South Pacific where he was a pilot on a B-24 bomber (Larson, Letter to Richard Holm). At sometime between the crash and his death, he received the title of captain. In the last letter his wife received from him, he had an abscessed tooth and was taking leave to have it fixed in Honolulu. Billie found out later that he flew one more mission before he left on his leave (Larson, Interview). In a letter that was written to Mrs. Orr on December 1, 1944, the acting co-pilot that was with Lt. Orr when the plane crashed explained what had happened. Lt. Orr was asked to fly as pilot for another crew in his squadron, so he agreed. The co-pilot was on leave and the regular pilot, Lt. Robert Ellison took the co-pilot position. The mission was from the island of Nanomea (Ellice Island Group) and the target was Makin Island (Gilbert Island Group). The mission was full of bad weather and flak (antiaircraft fire) as usual. Lt. Ellison explains the landing:

> We had a very narrow landing strip with poor lighting and 80 foot trees on all four sides with a built in crosswind of about forty miles per hour. We came in rather high and the runway had a couple of B-24s milling around on it – so the tower gave us the red light to go around. Bob gave the plane the gun but the two right engines gave out and we went into a gradual right bank – Well we cut down about 60 tree tops and both Bob and I tried to keep her straight and level but we lost the

tail then the right wing. Next thing before crashing I heard Bob yell "cover up" (to me). I was thrown clear but Bob was killed by the impact. He never did have a chance to get out. Not one of the fellows burned as the fellows got them out right away (Ellison, Letter to Mrs. Orr).

Lt. Robert Orr was born on February 19, 1919, in Thornburg, Iowa. He was the middle child of Andrew and Stella Orr. He had an older sister Jean and a younger brother Richard. Lt. Orr received his degree from Iowa State and was planning on going to law school; but with the war on, he decided that he should join up and get his wings, which he received on Friday, September 26, 1941, at Kelly Field, Texas (Larson, Letter to Richard Holm).

Left to right, Lt Orr, Cpl. Beaudry, and Lt. Kelly. This picture was taken at the Gowen Field Hospital (Photo from Freeborg Scrapbook).

Adgate B. Schermerhorn

Second Lt. A.B. Schermerhorn was from Ausable Chasm, N.Y. He was the co-pilot on the B-23 but he is also listed as an armament officer (U.S Air Force photographs). After the crash, he was in the Gowen Field Hospital for about a month or six-weeks because he had two badly infected toes and badly frost bitten feet (Freeborg 7). When he was released from the hospital, he along with some of the other crew members had to petition the Boise Rationing Board for new flight boots as his old ones had been ruined on the walk out. The rationing board came to their relief and provided them, not with the regular G.I. brogans, but with dress oxford flight boots. He then went back to McChord and the Freeborgs would have him over for dinner from time to time. He eventually got engaged to Betty Clifton, and then he was re-stationed in the Aleutian Islands west of Alaska, but returned sometime before the end of 1943 (Freeborg, Scrapbook). According to his youngest son Jan he never saw combat (Interview).

Ed Freeborg periodically stayed in touch with Schermerhorn over the years, and in 1994 received a letter from him. He had planned on revisiting the crash site but his arthritis had gotten too bad. At the time of the letter he had to drive his car to get the mail from his mailbox, which was only three lots down. He ended up not marrying Betty Clifton because she felt that marrying a pilot would mean a short marriage (Freeborg Scrapbook). He later married Mildred and had two boys, Jon and Jan. Before he was discharged, he did receive his captaincy. After his wife passed away in 1988, he was reunited with Betty Clifton, whom he was originally engaged to and they moved to

Tucson, Arizona (Jan Schermerhorn, Interview). Adgate passed away on January 17, 1999 (Jon Schermerhorn, Interview).

Adgate B. Scheremerhorn was born on September 3, 1918, to Giles and Carolyn Schermerhorn. Adgate had a younger brother Henry who later served in the European Theater of War. Adgate had a love for the outdoors and enjoyed spending time in the Adirondacks, in upper state New York. His eldest son Jon Schermerhorn says his father was quite a horseman. Adgate was recognized as a horse expert and a judge for the American Horse Show Association. Jon recalled when he was growing up his dad always had at least thirty horses he was breeding. After the war he ultimately received his masters degree from St. Lawrence University and became a high school teacher. Jon says, "his father was a natural born teacher, he loved kids and the kids loved him" (Interview).

Lt. Schermerhorn at the Lake Fork Guard Station when the rescuers arrived (Photo from Freeborg Scrapbook).

Staff Sgt. Forrest B. Hoover

Forrest B. Hoover was from Washington D.C. and was listed as the flight engineer on B-23, 39-052 (U.S Air Force photographs). Little is known about Hoover but Ed's mother wrote, "The only real tragedy of the crash was that Hoover had to lose his foot. He will have an artificial foot though, but will be discharged from the army, which will break his heart more than losing his foot did" (Freeborg 9). He was married at the time of the plane crash and in Ed's Scrapbook there is a photograph of Della Freeborg and Mrs. Hoover in front of the Y.W.C.A in Boise.

S/Sgt. Loewen on the left and S/Sgt. Hoover on the right at the Gowen Field Hospital (Photo from Freeborg Scrapbook).

Second Lt. James V. Kelly

James V. Kelly was named after his father and was from Warren, Kansas. He was listed as the bombardier on 39-052 (U.S Air Force photographs). Little is known about Lt. Kelly but his mother did write a letter to Penn Stohr thanking him for rescuing her son:

> Dear Sir, I want to thank you a million times for rescuing my son. I had been praying night and day that God would direct someone to the boys and it was you he directed to them. Those were terrible days of anxiety and suspense but I felt all the time God would protect them until they could be found. I was glad to hear your voice that Sunday night, my other son was talking to you, and how we did rejoice to know we were talking to the pilot that brought them to safety. I shall always feel grateful to you and I pray Gods richest blessing upon you and yours. And I shall always feel you were the instrument God used to locate the boys. Thanks again, Sincerely Mrs. J.V. Kelly Sr. (Letter Courtesy of D. Stohr).

Staff Sgt. Paul G. Loewen

Paul Loewen was from Ianola, Oklahoma and was listed as the navigator. Little is known about him as well. His mother wrote Penn Stohr a post card thanking him for his rescue: "To Mr. Penn Stohr. I praise god for your faith and belief in the spoken word. Your greatest reward will be through the glory of our Lord and Savior. May you never lack for gas. Yours Truly" (Postcard, Courtesy D. Stohr). His last contact with Ed Freeborg was in 1982. At that time he lived Ault, Colorado (G. Freeborg, Letter to Richard Holm)

Staff Sgt. Ralph Pruitt was twenty-eight years old at the time of the plane crash. He was from Wichita, Kansas. Before enlisting in the AAF, he did live in Kellogg, Idaho, and worked for the Sunshine Mining Company. Nothing else is known about him (G. Freeborg, Letter to Richard Holm).

Cpl Earl Beaudry was from Portland, Oregon. Nothing else is known about him (G. Freeborg, Letter to Richard Holm).

Penn Stohr Sr.

Willis Penn Stohr was born in Clarence, Missouri, in1902, to Willis and Nora Stohr. Penn never used his first name and went by his middle name. Penn had an older brother Paul and a younger brother Lee. The Stohr family moved to Plains, Montana, in 1910, where Penn attended high school. At about the age of 17 or 18 he learned to fly from Nick Mamer in Spokane, Washington, at Felts Field. He saved up enough money to buy his first airplane an OX5 Swallow airplane. He began earning a living with his new airplane by barnstorming in nearby towns. Barnstorming is a term used for acrobatic flying and stunts. He would often give people rides and his slogan was "a penny a pound." He married Alma Garber who was from Plains, in 1927 (D. Stohr, Interview).

In 1929 Penn and Alma had their first son, Dan, and a few years later moved to Cascade, Idaho. For a short time before the family moved to Cascade, they lived in Wallace, Idaho, where Penn was supposedly working for a mining company, but he was really flying liquor over the border from Canada. Prohibition created a high demand for a skilled pilot. He began work for Johnson Flying Service, flying part time during the summer, but in 1936 became a full time employee. During this time Penn and his wife had their first daughter, Bettina. Also during this period, the Stohrs moved frequently between Boise, Cascade, McCall, and Missoula. In 1941 they permanently moved to Valley County were Dan remembers them wintering in Cascade and summering in McCall (D. Stohr, Interview).

The winter of 1943 was a very busy one for Penn, as he rescued the five crew members of the B-23 at Loon Lake and was also instrumental in locating the crew that

had parachuted out of the B-17 that crashed near Challis, Idaho. He received national recognition for his efforts in both of these events. Later in 1943, Penn Stohr Jr. was born.

Penn Stohr Jr. has had an impressive career flying like his father. He started working for Johnson Flying Service in the late fifties until they were bought out in 1975 by Evergreen International Aviation. Penn Jr. is now Senior Vice-President of Operations for Evergreen. He remembers his father was always one for a good laugh. There are several very humors stories and events that he remembered, but one in particular relates to the B-23 at Loon Lake (P. Stohr, Interview).

On one of his many trips to Loon Lake he took many souvenirs from the bomber. One very important item was the .50 cal machine gun; along with it he took all the ammunition he could find. Well one evening, after having some fun with the boys out at the hanger in Cascade, he decided he would try out his new treasure. They drug out a fifty-five gallon barrel drum and strapped the machine gun down to the top of it. After several rattling rounds had been shot and lots of laughs they all noticed several fires starting along the runway. It turns out that the tracers in the ammunition, used to see where the bullets are going, had exploded and caught the grass on fire causing quite a scene. Needless to say some others at the airport were a little disgruntled about Penn and the boy's good laugh (P. Stohr, Interview).

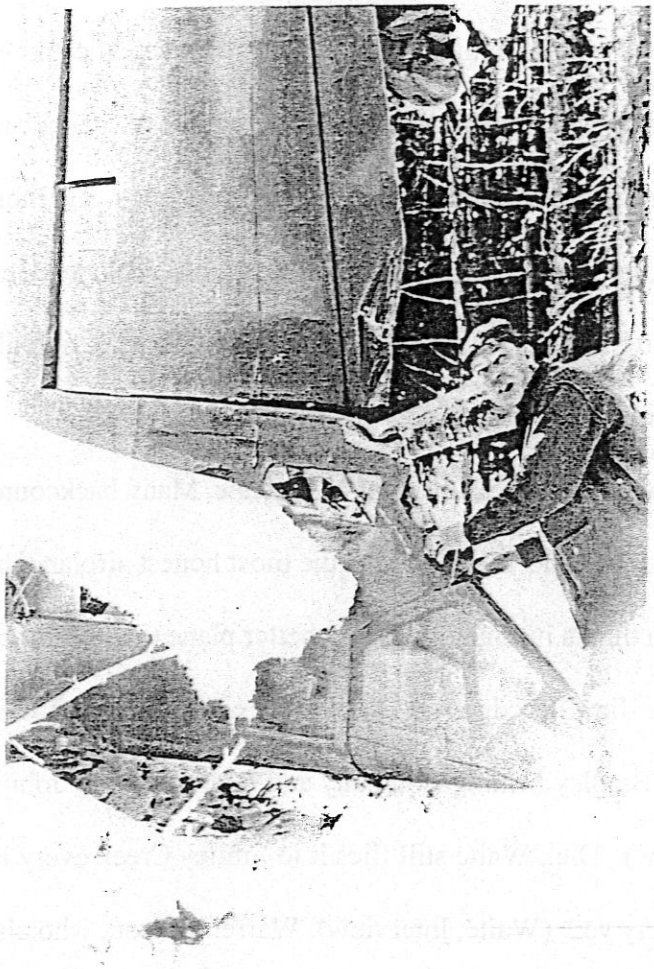
In 1945, Penn was transferred to Missoula, Montana, and lived there until 1957 when the Ford Tri-motor he was flying crashed. On June 19, he was doing aerial spraying for sagebrush near Townsend, Montana, with his good friend and co-pilot Robert Vallance, when the Tri-motor crashed and then burned, killing both pilots. Dan Stohr wrote a brief biography of his father's life, entitled "Penn Stohr Skyward in

Triumph and Tragedy," published in the High Country newspaper. He captures his character very well:

> Penn Stohr was an easy-going fellow, courteous and well liked. He was always happy when he could light a cigar and put in his time flying or rebuilding aircraft. He lived and breathed flying, and was a skilled mechanic and woodworker as well. This dedicated cigar-smoker worried more over being caught short of cigars than he ever did about any weather or flying problems. He thoroughly knew the mountain airports as well as the limitations of his airplane. He could get in and out of a shorter field, with a bigger load, on a hotter day, at higher elevation, than just about anyone in the business (D. Stohr).

The Travelair was Penn Stohr's favorite plane. Many backcountry pilots would agree. Jim Larkin said, "The Travelair was the most honest airplane that I have ever flown." Jim Larkin thinks it might even be a better plane than what he flies today (Larkin, Interview). Jim Eldredge and Dick Waite currently own NC 8865 the Travelair that was owned by Bradley Mining Company and later owned by Johnson Flying Service (Eldredge, Interview). Dick Waite still flies it to Smiley Creek every Fathers Day and to a few air shows every year (Waite, Interview). Warren Ellison, who also worked for Johnson Flying Service, remembered that Penn flew two particular Travelairs during the period that he rescued the fliers at Loon Lake. He flew NC 623H, which crashed in 1946 near Dixie, Idaho and killed the pilot, Bill Yaggy. The other Travelair was NC 655H, which crashed in March of 1945 and killed the pilot, Dick Johnson. Dick Johnson was Bob Johnson's brother, the owner of Johnson Flying Service (Ellison, Interview). According to Penn Jr., the rescue plane at Loon Lake was NC 623H, which is confirmed

by his father's logbook. Penn Sr. never wrote much of anything in his logbooks but the amount of flight time for each day. The day he found the B-23 he recorded, "Found bomber on Loon Lake" (P. Stohr, Interview).



Penn Stohr at the crash site, standing at the tail of the B-23 (Photo courtesy of Jayne Brown).

Search Party At Loon Lake

Lloyd Johnson - Worked as a laborer at the time of crash and became jumper foreman later in 1943 (Johnson, Interview).

Gene Powers - Ranger at Paddy Flat (Johnson, Interview).

Ted Harwood - Owned and operated Payette Lakes Lumber (Brown, Interview).

Warren Brown - Owned and operated Brown's Tie and Lumber, he and Ted Harwood were brother in-law (Brown, Interview).

Glenn Thompson - Fire Control. Staff (Hockaday 155).

Rescue Party from McCall to Lake Fork Guard Station

Yale Mitchell - Forester and Ranger (Hockaday 156).

Leonard Lietske - Worked in saw mill (Avery, Interview).

John Wick - Ranger at Krassel (Hockaday 154).

Bill Garrett - Unknown

Gil McCoy - Ranger (Hockaday 156).

Don Park - Warehouse manager (Hockaday 155).

Salvaging Crew

Tom Coski - Guard and grazing (Hockaday 155).

Walter Howard - Firefighter (Avery, Interview).

John Wick - See above

Glen Thompson - See above

Relics of the Past That Can Still Be Seen

Leona Hoff Park and the switchboard is a wonderful part of the story. The Roseberry Museum, near Donnelly has an excellent example of the switchboard that the call came in on. The Lake Fork Ranger Station where Lt. Schermerhorn placed the call to Leona is still at its present location and few changes have been made.

Fred Williams, the Ranger for the Lake Fork District at the time of the crash. When he first came to the Payette National Forest in 1920; he was a part time smokechaser and clerk. In 1923 he became the Big Creek District Ranger for a year and then became principle clerk in McCall until 1929, when he transferred to the Lake Fork District (Hockaday 169). He originally stayed in a tent with a wooden floor until the buildings were finished sometime around 1934 (Avery, Interview). The Barn was built in 1931 and the loft building was built the following year in 1932 (USDA-FS File, PY-397). The building that Lt. Schermerhorn and Sgt. Freeborg broke into was where Fred Williams stayed. This building was built around the same period as the other two buildings. Claude Avery moved this building to the Krassel Ranger Station along with another identical building from Poverty Flat. Claude Avery worked for Fred Williams, starting in 1934, and worked for the Forest Service until 1979. Claude remembered moving the buildings to Krassel shortly after Fred Williams passed away, which would have been in 1955. He said they poured foundations for both buildings and put them together in a "T" design. They gutted the insides and completely renovated them (Avery, Interview). The "T" design building is still at the Krassel Ranger Station, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Fred Williams at Lake Fork Guard Station, sometime in the 1940s (Photo courtesy of Ann Lloyd Edwards).

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